Getting them together: equalities, cohesion and linguistic identity

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Confusion or clarity?

Schools and local authorities now have legal duties to create and evaluate equality schemes for disability, ethnicity and gender. Further, they have a duty to promote community cohesion. These duties derive from four different pieces of legislation, produced at four different times and in four different contexts, and with four different sets of priorities. Also, they came into force on four different dates – in 2002 in the case of ethnicity, late autumn 2006 in the case of disability, and summer and autumn 2007 respectively for gender and cohesion. In consequence they appear to be separate from each other and there may be a sense in schools and local authorities of fragmentation and being overburdened – ODTAA, one damn thing after another.

In order to cope with such confusion and uncertainty, schools and local authorities may be tempted to put their energies into simply doing the minimum necessary to comply with the law, rather than striving to make real differences to the life-chances of children and young people. If this happens, pupils for whom English is an additional language will be amongst those who are most disadvantaged. If, however, schools and local authorities combine the four duties into a single positive policy, pupils learning English as an additional language will be amongst those who most benefit.

There is therefore a pressing need to harmonise or synthesise the four different sets of duties, so that they are seen as a single set of clear principles. This is what the DCSF has done, as shown in a workbook on equality impact assessments published on their website on 4 December 2007.[1]

This article summarises the principles that the DCSF has proposed and then discusses a simple model for thinking about, to recall a famous phrase, hearts and minds.

The approach adopted by the DCSF involves combining the best features of the four different pieces of legislation, so that they improve and enhance each other. Such an approach is sometimes known as 'levelling up'. An alternative way of putting it is that points that are explicit in one piece of legislation should be seen as reflecting the spirit, even though not necessarily the letter, of the other three. Using this approach, the DCSF has identified the seven underlying principles summarised below.

Principle 1: All learners are of equal value
All learners and potential learners are of equal value and should benefit from DCSF policies, practices and programmes:

- whether or not they are disabled
- whatever their ethnicity, culture, religious affiliation and faith, national origin or national status
- whichever their gender.

Principle 2: Relevant differences should be recognised
Treating people equally can involve treating them differently. Policies, practices and programmes must not be discriminatory, but nevertheless should be discriminating. They may therefore be differentiated to take account of differences of life-experience, outlook and background, and in the kinds of barrier and disadvantage which people face, in relation to:

- disability, so that reasonable adjustments are made
- ethnicity, so that different cultural backgrounds and experiences of racism are recognised
- gender, so that the different needs and experiences of girls and boys, and of women and men, are recognised.

Principle 3: Workforce development
Policies and programmes should benefit all members of the workforce, for example in recruitment and promotion, and in continuing professional development:

- whether or not they are disabled
- whatever their ethnicity, culture, religious affiliation and faith, national origin or national status
- whichever their gender.

Principle 4: Positive attitudes and relationships should be fostered
Policies and programmes should promote:

- positive attitudes towards disabled people, and good relations between disabled and non-disabled people
- positive interaction and good relations between groups and communities different from each other in terms of ethnicity, culture, religious affiliation and faith, and national origin or national status
- mutual respect and good relations between boys and girls, women and men.

Principle 5: Society as a whole should benefit
Policies and programmes should benefit society as a whole, both locally and nationally, by fostering greater cohesion, and greater participation in public life of:

- disabled people
- people of a wide range of ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds
- women as well as men.

Principle 6: Current inequalities and barriers should be addressed and reduced
In addition to avoiding or minimising possible negative impacts, polices and programmes should take opportunities to maximise positive impacts by addressing, reducing and removing inequalities and barriers that already exist between:

- disabled and non-disabled people
- people of different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds
- boys and girls, women and men.

Principle 7: Policy development should involve widespread consultation and involvement
People affected by a policy or programme should be consulted and involved in the design of new policies, and the review of existing ones. Such consultation should be both direct and through representative organisations, and should be based on principles of transparency and accountability. Further, it should involve those who in the past have been excluded or disadvantaged, and who continue to face barriers:

- disabled people
- people of minority ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds
- women as well as men.

Points of semantics

Reading through these statements of principles, NALDIC members may be interested to note various points of semantics. Most obviously, the DCSF made a conscious decision to use the term ‘ethnicity’ in preference to ‘race’, even though the latter is enshrined in legislation. It also deliberatively chose to speak of ‘communities’ in preference to ‘racial groups’ and to avoid entirely the unsatisfactory term ‘BME’. Further, it chose to list disability, ethnicity and gender in alphabetical order, not in the order of legislation relating to equality schemes. The phrase ‘ethnicity, culture, faith community, national origin or national status’ was formulated in 2005 in the course of the DfES’s work on countering racist bullying in schools. It was intended to capture the spirit of anti-discrimination legislation relating not only to so-called race but also to religion and belief.

In view of the widespread popularity of the term BME in central and local government, it is relevant to mention here the reasons given by the DCSF for not using it in its recent handbook. The term can occasionally be useful, the handbook admits, for providing a broad-brush overview in order to refer to all people not categorised as ‘white British’. It is seldom if ever helpful, however, for clarifying the practical measures which need to be introduced to make improvements in provision. Further objections to the term include: it runs the risk of dehumanising, as does any such use of abbreviations (for example, ‘EAL children’, SEN pupils’, ‘EMAG pupils’); it implies black people are not of a minority background; it cannot be used grammatically as an adjective before a noun such as ‘person’ or ‘people’; it reflects a simplistic majority/minority distinction that is frequently inaccurate or inappropriate; it is arguably no more than a code for ‘coloured’ or ‘visibly different’.

Equality impact assessments

The concept of impact assessment was developed in the equalities field in Northern Ireland in the 1990s, having been imported from the field of environmental concerns. Key concepts in environmental impact assessments were unintended consequence and adverse impact. Key principles were the need to conduct assessments before new policies and projects were introduced and the need for them to be evidence-based, rather than based on hope and speculation reflecting ideology, business interests or political expediency. To be evidence-based, they had to take into account the views and knowledge of experts in environmental sciences, and also the experiences and perceptions of individuals and communities most likely to be directly affected.

When the concept of equality impact assessment was adopted in the rest of the UK, through the Race Relations Amendment Act and its regulations, the basic concern in the first instance was similarly to identify, and to prevent or minimise, possible adverse impacts. More recently, however, particularly due to the influence of new thinking and legislation around disability and gender, there has been a growing realisation that identifying and removing negative impacts is not enough. Also, and even more importantly, it is necessary to identify and

maximise potential positive impacts. This is the recurring emphasis in the new DCSF handbook.

Hearts and minds

The equalities agenda is about changing behaviours, practices and systems, not about changing hearts and minds. The latter task is not irrelevant, however. Consideration of it can be usefully introduced by a snatch of conversation that took place in New York in the early 1980s as described in William Boyd's *Stars and Bars*.[2] An American speaks to an Englishman:

"How would you react, Henderson, if I said … if I said that the one word I associate with you is hostel? "
"Hostel? " Henderson's mind raced. "As in 'Youth Hostel'?"
"No, for God's sake. As in hostel aircraft, hostel country, as in 'The Soviets are hostel to American policy'. "
"Oh. Got you. We say 'style.' 'Hostyle'."
"Why do you hate me, Henderson? Why do I sense this incredible aggression coming from you?"

Boyd's snatch of conversation is a glimpse of what another novelist famously called *la comédie humaine*, the human comedy, the funny ways – some of them peculiar, some of them ha-ha, many of them both – in which we humans interact. It's basically our manners that are funny - the practices, codes and customs we devise in our various local situations to enable us to rub along reasonably smoothly with each other, with at least the appearance of cohesion and mutual liking. Differences of pronunciation – hostel/hostile, tomahto, tomayto – are paradigm examples of differences of culture. There are different ways of being human rather as there different accents within a single language.

Even more importantly, Boyd's vignette is a beautiful reminder that the first thing we humans are programmed and wired to do, when we encounter difference and diversity, is assess whether the person we're encountering is (as it were) hostel, or whether on the contrary they are well-disposed towards us. The hostel/friendly dimension in our assessments, expectations and summations of each other is known also as cold/warm, threatening/supportive, aggressive/cooperative. This primary continuum of expectations and assumptions is recognised not only by ordinary common sense but also by academic social psychologists, including – amongst others – those who are watching and reflecting on the equalities agenda as it develops in this country, and throughout Europe.[3]

The second thing we are wired to do, sometimes in exactly the same split second as the first thing, is assess how powerful the other person is – how capable, competent, resourceful. What do they bring to the party? What goods do they have that we'd like them to share with us? What bads do they have we don't them to inflict on us? One iconic version of this question comes from Stalin: 'How many battalions has the Pope?' It was also alluded to in a legendary exchange between Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. 'You know,' said Fitzgerald, 'rich people are different from us.' – 'Yeah,' growled Hemingway. 'They got more money.'

We humans frequently structure our hearts and minds with the two primary continua outlined above – hostel/well-disposed and capable/weak – as the hemispheres in the mental maps which pre-exist our actual encounters with each other. We pre-judge that people will be situated somewhere in each of these dimensions. A sketch of the mental map is shown below.

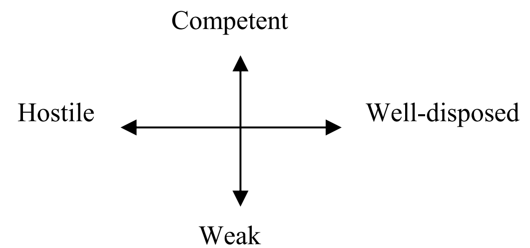

Figure 1: the mental sketch map with which humans perceive 'the Other'

The map can be readily converted into a 2 x 2 matrix, distinguishing between four types of perception. Going round anti-clockwise from the top left, there are a) people perceived to be hostile and competent b) people perceived to be hostile and weak c) people perceived to be well-disposed and weak and d) people perceived to be well-disposed and competent. The latter group is sometimes known as PLU – People Like Us. The equalities agenda is about how we treat and see PLT, people like them.

First, it is relevant to all six strands or dimensions in the equalities agenda from a legislative point of view – age, disability, ethnicity, gender, religion and sexuality – not to ethnicity only. It is also, incidentally, relevant to the elephant in the room whenever there is a primary focus on the equalities agenda, the name of the elephant being class.

People campaigning against age discrimination refer to the bottom right hand quadrant as the 'dear and doddery' quadrant – old people are seen as well-disposed ('dear') but without power or competence ('doddery').[4] (The definition of 'old'. Incidentally, is 15 years older than oneself!) In the field of disability equality there is a similar concern to shift attitudes and perceptions from the bottom right quadrant to the top right. In relation to sexism and gender equality the map reminds us of three kinds of myth with which men have historically viewed, and are still capable of viewing, *la deuxième sexe*: dumb blonde (bottom right); the Eve who weakly allows Satan into paradise and uses then her wiles to seduce Adam (bottom left); and the evil stepmother or witch who is equally satanic but exercises power through casting

spells, reducing males to frogs, bulls or beasts, or petrifying them to bloodless and impotent stone.
At its most extreme, sexism and patriarchy do not envisage that the top right quadrant exists or can exist. 'Why,' laments that character in *My Fair Lady*, 'can't a woman be more like a man?'
With regard to the race and ethnicity dimension of the equalities agenda, the bottom left quadrant represents classical racism, so to speak. White people saw others as, in Kipling's infamous phrases, fluttered folk (weak and disorganised) and wild (vicious and dangerous), and half-devil (hostile) and half-child (weak). The onus on white people, their burden in Kipling's term, was to civilise others, namely to make them, if possible, PLU. Or if that was not possible (and basically racism envisaged it was profoundly impossible), to get them into the bottom right quadrant, the place where, in a phrase from the times of European imperialism, the natives are friendly, even though subjugated. The bottom right quadrant is also sometimes referred to as the place of 'colour-blind racism' or 'velvet racism'. Much discourse about community cohesion, incidentally, belongs to this quadrant, alas.

Concluding note

The four new or newish duties around cohesion, disability, ethnicity and gender are both a threat and an opportunity for the EAL field. The threat lies in the possibility that schools and local authorities will feel overburdened by them and will respond with apathy and inertia. If this happens, pupils for whom English is an additional language will be amongst those who become even more disadvantaged than they already are. The opportunity lies in the possibility that the four duties will be combined and harmonised holistically into a single overall policy. Such a policy will be concerned not only with changing structures, systems and behaviours but also with changing hearts and minds. If this happens, pupils learning English as an additional language will be amongst those who most benefit.

[1] http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/des/docs/EQUIAWorkbook.doc

[2] First published 1984. The quotation is from p.33 of the Penguin edition.

[3] For example, see *Ageism: a benchmark of public attitudes by* Sujata Ray, Ellen Sharp and Dominic Abrams, compiled for the Centre for the Study of Group Processes at the University of Kent for Age Concern England, 2006.

[4] Sujata Ray *et al,* as in note above.